

CREMATION: CHRISTIAN OR PAGAN?

December 6, 1995 (David Cloud, Fundamental Baptist Information Service, P.O. Box 610368, Port Huron, MI 48061, 866-295-4143, fbns@wayoflife.org) -

According to the cover story in the December 5, 1995, issue of USA Today, the number of cremations in North America is increasing dramatically. In 1962, fewer than 5% of the people who died were cremated. Only 30 years later, by 1992, this had increased to 20%. In Hawaii, the number is 60.6%. In Washington, 49.9%. In Nevada, 49.8%. In Alaska, 47.2%. In Montana, 45.3%.

The article noted that the rising acceptance of cremation has coincided with a drop in "religious barriers to cremation." The disposal of the body after death is a religious matter. One's beliefs will determine such choices. Historically, burial has been a testimony of faith in the bodily resurrection. Historically, cremation has been practiced among those, such as Hindus, who deny the bodily resurrection and who believe in reincarnation. Historically, wherever the Gospel of Jesus Christ has found acceptance, pagan practices such as cremation have been rejected. The increase in cremation in North American society has paralleled the wholesale rejection of the Bible in this same society. As paganism increases its steely hold on American and Canadian hearts, cremation becomes increasingly popular.

THE METHOD OF CREMATION IN NORTH AMERICA

The following is excerpted from USA Today, December 5, 1995:

"The three-hour process of burning a body and grinding it to small fragments often takes place away from loved ones' eyes. The body, usually dressed but stripped of all jewelry, slides into "retort"--a brick-lined oven that looks like a big bread oven.

"Pacemakers are removed because their batteries can explode at high temperatures. Silicone breast implants, which can't be removed, are creating problems for crematory operators who say remains often stick to the melting silicone.

"The gas or oil-fired ovens are heated to about 1,700 degrees. Although often called ashes, the remains are actually bone fragments. These are swept with a giant hoe-like scraper from the bottom of the retort and put in a container to cool down. Any large debris, such as dental crowns or hip prostheses, is removed.

"Everything is then ground to granule-sized pieces. The whole process takes about three hours. The result is about six pounds of remains compact enough to fit in a shoebox."

THE METHOD OF CREMATION IN ASIA

Cremation, as just described and as practiced today in the more technically advanced nations, no longer has the physical ghastliness associated with cremations performed in the less developed parts of the world. The modern method incorporates the use of an exceedingly hot incinerator which reduces the body to ashes quickly, and the entire process is done out of the view of loved ones and the public.

Not so in places like South Asia, where we have lived and served Christ for ten years. It would seem that any Christian who could stand beside the "holy" River Bagmati in Kathmandu, Nepal, and observe the burning of the body of a Hindu and the heathen death rituals connected therewith, would cast aside in repulsion every thought of cremation being an acceptable Christian practice.

A few years ago I stood three or so feet from a burning corpse with a missionary pastor from Singapore and his wife who were visiting us. The head was already burnt beyond recognition and the skull split open due to internal expansion from the heat of the fire. The lower legs and feet were unscorched, as they were protruding from the pile of burning wood and stubble upon which the man's body lay. The professional Hindu burners were poking the body from time to time to keep the members in the fire and were adding stubble and wood as needed. The bones were contracting and popping; the bodily organs were frying and the juices sizzling in the intense heat.

My wife, a nurse with experience in a hospital in a very remote part of Asia and in an intensive care ward in the States, stood with another friend observing the ghastly sight from a distance, unwilling to come closer. The air for a hundred yards or more was filled with the unmistakable, stomach-turning stench of burning human flesh. When the fire had burnt most of the body, the ashes and remaining members were shoved into the river.

This is cremation as has been practiced by heathen religions for centuries, but without the sanitization adopted in more technically advanced areas.

Would you treat your loved ones so? Is this an acceptable Christian practice? No sir, cremation is a heathen practice. It is of heathen origin and serves heathen purposes. Why do the Hindus and those of other heathen religions cremate? They do it in the belief that the dead are not raised again, whereas the Bible says there is a resurrection of the just and the unjust. They do it in the belief that the dead will be reincarnated, thus to destroy the body is sometimes considered a way of releasing the spirit of the deceased. Again, some practice cremation with the heathen idea that by destroying the body of the deceased the fear of that individual staying in the vicinity and haunting the loved ones is diminished.

There is nothing Christian about cremation. We were standing that day, as I have many other times, observing cremation in the surroundings from which the practice arose--idolatrous, Christless heathenism.

THE UNSCRIPTURALNESS OF CREMATION

[The following is from the Way of Life Encyclopedia of the Bible & Christianity. Edited by David W. Cloud. Copyright 1994. Way of Life Literature, 1219 N. Harns Rd., Oak Harbor, WA 98277. \$29.95 hardbound book. \$49.95 hypertext computer edition. (Add \$4 S/H).]

The following are the reasons we are convinced that cremation should not be practiced by Christians:

1. Cremation has a heathen origin and purpose. Why do the Hindus and those of other heathen religions cremate? They do it in the belief that the dead are not raised again, whereas the Bible says there is a resurrection of the just and the unjust. The heathen practice cremation in the belief that the dead will be reincarnated; to destroy the body is sometimes considered a way of releasing the spirit of the deceased. Again, some practice cremation with the heathen idea that by destroying the body of the deceased the fear of that individual staying in the vicinity and haunting the loved ones is diminished. There is nothing Christian about cremation.
2. God's people have always practiced burial. Abraham (Gen. 25:8-10), Sarah (Gen. 23:1-4), Rachel (Gen. 35:19-20), Isaac (Gen. 35:29), Jacob (Gen. 49:33; 50:1-13), Joseph (Gen. 50:26), Joshua (Jos. 24:29-30), Eleazar (Jos. 24:33), Samuel (1 Sam. 25:1), David (1 Ki. 2:10), John the Baptist (Matt. 14:10-12), Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:5-10), Stephen (Acts 8:2). In Rom. 15:4 and 1 Cor. 10:11 God tells us that we are to follow the Bible's examples as well as its direct instructions. Even in difficult circumstances God's people in olden days practiced burial. For example, Joseph's body was kept for over 400 years in Egypt and then carried through the 40 years of wilderness wanderings before being buried in the Promised Land. We read of this in Gen. 50:24-25; Ex. 13:19 and Jos. 24:32. How much simpler it would have been for the Israelites to have cremated Joseph, then carried his ashes with them in a tiny container! This they refused to do. Joseph, a follower of the one true God, a man who looked forward to the bodily resurrection, was given an honorable burial. From this important example, we learn that even if cremation is less expensive or easier than burial, it is still to be rejected, as the Israelites rejected the economical and simpler way to transport Joseph's body.
3. Burial looks forward to resurrection. The reason God's people have always been careful to practice burial is not difficult to understand. We believe in a bodily resurrection (Rom. 8:22-23; 1 Cor. 15:20-23; 2 Cor. 5:1; 1 Cor. 15:51-57). Yes, the buried body will decompose in time. Yes, there are occasions in which Christians die in ways which render burial impossible--in the sinking of ships, in fires, etc. But when at all possible we bury. Why the trouble? Because it is our certain hope that the same individual will be raised in the same body, only changed. The physical body is called the seed for the resurrection body. When planted, a seed decomposes, and the new plant comes forth. The Bible uses this to illustrate resurrection. In 1 Cor. 15:35-44 the Apostle answers those who would ask how it is possible for God to raise again a decomposed body. The terminology used by the Holy Spirit in this passage is that of husbandry--planting seed. The farmer does not destroy his seed; he plants it, then from the

decaying seed comes forth the new life. Such is burial and the resurrection. When we bury a Christian loved one, we are planting the seed for the resurrection body! It is a powerful testimony of our unwavering faith in God's Word regarding the promise of bodily resurrection. Contrast heathenism. They have no such knowledge or hope. The Hindus and Buddhists, for example, believe in reincarnation. Though they believe in a human soul which is distinct from the body, they do not believe that soul, once departed from the body at death, will be resurrected in any relation whatsoever to the first body. Rather they believe the soul will be reincarnated in another entirely unrelated body, or into a non-physical sphere of existence.

4. God's people have always buried their dead with this magnificent hope burning in their hearts. "We will see that brother or sister again in that same body, only changed, glorified!" Hallelujah! Only through the death and shed blood of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ can we have this certain hope. He has taken upon Himself on the cross the punishment for our sins, carried our sins into the grave, and risen again in eternal triumph three days later. When an individual thoroughly acknowledges his sinfulness before God, repents of his sin, and receives Jesus Christ as his or her Lord and Savior, the sin debt is paid, and eternal life and glory is promised from God the Father. Part of this heritage in Christ is the glorified resurrection body. God practices burial (De. 34:5,6).

5. Cremation is a sign of God's curse. Throughout the Bible the destruction of a human body or of an object by fire is used as a sign of divine wrath (Ex. 32:20; Lev. 10:1-2; De. 7:25; Nu. 16:35; 2 Ki. 10:26; 1 Ch. 14:12; Acts 19:18-19; Rev. 20:15).

6. For a person not to have a proper burial was considered a dishonor (1 Ki. 21:23-24; Ps. 83:9-10).

7. The Christian's body belongs to God. The body is not ours to destroy (Rom. 14:8; 1 Cor. 6:19-20). If the body is burned in a house fire or devoured by wild beasts, that is beyond our control. But we believe to willfully destroy the body is contrary to these passages.

8. God has plainly called cremation wickedness (Amos 2:1).

The Lord Jesus Christ was buried, and He is our great example (Jn. 19:38-42). Just as the Lord Jesus Christ was buried in certainty that He would rise again on the third day according to the Scriptures, even so is the Christian said to rest at death. To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord, as the Apostle Paul testified (2 Co. 5:9 and Ph. 1:21-23). The body without the spirit is dead (Jam. 2:26). The dead body sleeps in the grave while the redeemed soul waits in glory for the great resurrection day.

Of course we cannot force people either to bury or not to bury. We know that the manner of one's burial does not affect one's salvation or resurrection, but we do believe these things are important, and we are convinced that Christians should take their stand upon the examples of the Word of God.